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THE ORGANIZATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

BY ARTHUR T. HADLEY

For the past twenty years we have been trying to give the people a more direct voice in the work of government. We have been experimenting with measures like the initiative, the referendum, the recall, or the direct primary. Some of these things have passed beyond the stage of experiment and have become recognized parts of the political system of many of our States. But as we look over what has been accomplished by these means it is surprising to see how slight has been their effect. They have not justified either the hopes of their advocates or the fears of their opponents. Reformers thought that by providing for a spontaneous expression of the popular will the referendum and the direct primary would give us better laws and better candidates. Conservatives thought that any such spontaneous expression of the popular will would lead to disastrous radicalism. Both parties were deceived. The new system does not provide for spontaneous expression of popular will to anything like the extent which is commonly supposed. It has simply substituted one kind of organization for another.

This is not the first time such a thing has happened in American history. Ninety years ago the overthrow of the caucus system gave rise to similar hopes and was followed by similar disappointments.

During the first quarter of the nineteenth century the members of Congress in each party held "caucuses" to determine who should be the candidate at the next presidential election. Theoretically the people chose electors and the electors chose a President. Practically the members of the previous Congress restricted the range of choice to two men.

This system was severely criticized. It was regarded as a violation of the fundamental principles of the Constitution for members of Congress to undertake to say who should or should

not be President. This feeling became so strong that the Congressional caucus was overthrown in 1824 and the field left free for popular nomination. The change was hailed with enthusiasm as a triumph of Constitutional principles and a means of giving the people the opportunity to choose the men they wanted. But it did very little practical good. The party convention took the place of the party caucus. The people were no longer compelled to choose between candidates selected by members of a former Congress; but they were compelled to choose between candidates selected by members of nominating conventions, and the convention was quite as much under the control of politicians as the caucus had been. We had changed the form of political organization and control; we had not done away with the substance. In certain respects the convention system of nomination was even more objectionable than the caucus system. It avoided the open connection between the legislative and executive departments of the Government, but it gave a chance for all sorts of hidden connections. The caucus system had defied the spirit of the Constitution; the convention system evaded or ignored it.

It took people seventy or eighty years to discover how completely the control of political machinery enabled a skilful man to control popular government itself. The immediate effect of this discovery is seen in the introduction of the initiative and the referendum to prevent the politicians from determining what laws shall be passed, and the direct primary to prevent them from determining what candidates shall be nominated. Inexperienced people regard these changes as meaning a purification of politics and a triumph of democracy, in the same way that their great-grandfathers regarded the overthrow of the Congressional caucus as a purification of politics and a triumph of democracy. The chance for disappointment is as large now as it was then. In 1915, as in 1825, we are simply discarding one form of organization and substituting another. Whether the new one will be better or worse than the old one will depend upon the intelligence with which we meet its possibilities and its dangers.

The party organization of the latter part of the nineteenth century was a complex mechanism for determining and organizing public sentiment. It had its ward leaders and its district leaders who were in touch with local conditions, its county committees to harmonize the claims and wishes of the several districts, and its central heads or bosses that directed the policy

of the whole organization. It was its constant aim to make up a list of candidates popular enough to secure a large vote and at the same time subservient enough to yield to the wishes of the party machine in all minor matters.

This method of organization was most effective when candidates were nominated by conventions and laws were made by candidates thus nominated. When the people themselves vote on nominations and laws the politician must go to work in a different way. To have them made to suit him, he must appeal more directly to public sentiment. This sentiment can best be created by the influence of newspapers and magazines. It is through the press—daily, weekly, or monthly—that the American people forms its opinion as to men and measures. The success or failure of a candidate in securing the nomination depends largely upon the support which he receives from this quarter. The man who accomplishes most in modern politics is he who recognizes this fact most fully. It is not by the personal influence which was characteristic of the old party system that nominations are now secured and the way made clear for the passage of laws. It is by the influence of the printed page, which enables the man who controls it to determine thousands of votes for good or for evil.

In 1824 we overthrew the legislative caucus as a dominant power in politics, and left the field open for the party machine. To-day we are overthrowing the party machine and are leaving the field open to the press. And according as the press uses its new power for evil or for good will the results of the referendum and the direct primary, and other similar agencies of modern democracy, be also evil or good.

The organization of public opinion by the newspapers instead of by the party managers has certain distinct and obvious advantages. In the first place, it involves a more direct appeal to public opinion. A newspaper owes its power to the fact that its readers think as its editor wishes them to think. Their opinion may be right or wrong. The evidence presented to them may be complete or incomplete. But the opinion is in any case a real opinion, based on an examination of important evidence.

In the next place, this opinion is formed in the open, instead of being shaped by secret conferences, as was so often the case under old-fashioned party leadership. The newspaper makes its appeal in broad daylight. If the appeal is an unfair one, those who are arguing on the other side have at least a chance

to see what is being said and done by their opponents and to try to prove that it is unfair. Government by newspapers is government by discussion. It is perhaps the only form of government by discussion which is practicable in a large community.

In the third place, the call which the newspaper makes upon its readers almost necessarily takes the form of an appeal to their judgment rather than to their selfishness. A party manager working under the old system is constantly occupied in pointing out to his followers how their personal interests would be advanced by some measure or some candidate. A newspaper or magazine that should adopt this policy would soon find its influence confined within a limited circle. The general public would suspect, and rightly suspect, that a measure which one group of voters was urged to support on purely selfish grounds would be of doubtful benefit to the community as a whole. A journalist may himself often be led to support certain measures or certain candidates for reasons of self-interest. But his appeal to his readers for support must be based on broader grounds than this in order to be effective.

Such are the patent and obvious advantages of having the organization of popular opinion placed in the hands of the press. They are so fundamental in character that we are sometimes tempted to overlook the disadvantages and dangers with which this process is attended. The very fact that makes the appeal of the press an almost ideal agency in democratic government when rightly used correspondingly increases the perils when it is used wrongly. The power of an editor is a power to influence men's judgment. If he confines himself to legitimate methods of influence he realizes Bagehot's ideal of government by discussion. If he uses it wrongly, and leads his readers to act on imperfect information, he not only turns the action of the Government into wrong channels, but he effects the more permanent and disastrous harm of poisoning public opinion at its source.

A man who desires to make his newspaper popular is under a constant temptation to pander to the prejudices of his public. Without actually making grave misstatements, he can print the facts which they like in large type and suppress or relegate to obscure columns the facts which they do not like. Under these circumstances their judgment is distorted and their preconceived impressions confirmed, until they become incapable of weighing the real evidence on which their political action ought

to be based. If another paper tries to furnish them the true facts, they disbelieve it. They are accessible only to the kind of evidence that their own particular journal prefers to furnish.

The editor, under such circumstances, often makes the excuse that he gave his readers what they wanted. Even if he were an ordinary private citizen, this excuse would hardly pass current. The man who puts aniline dyes into children's candy is not excused by the fact that the children like to have their candy bright-colored. And the newspaper man is not an ordinary private citizen. He is, by the course of recent events, intrusted with a place of public responsibility. He has it in his power more than any other man to see that the country is governed well or ill. If he enables his readers to base their votes on organized information, he does service. If he leads them to base those votes on organized emotion, he does irreparable wrong.

I do not know whether it was President Lowell or some one else who coined the phrase "organized emotion." Whoever may have been the inventor, it is an accurate description of something which gravely threatens the stability of American government. Every student of history knows what fearful mistakes democracies have made under the influence of emotion evoked by popular orators; how thousands of men, listening to an appeal to prejudice veiled in the form of exposition of fact, have taken leave of their judgment and brought their commonwealths to the brink of ruin, or even beyond it. Our own people have not been wholly exempt from this danger. "The curse of the country," said Daniel Webster in a moment of bitterness, "has been its orators." This dangerous gift of the orator, of making emotion take the place of information, is one to which the newspaper has to-day fallen heir.

The danger which will result to the commonwealth if our political action is based on organized emotion rather than organized information is peculiarly great in connection with the direct primary.

Under the old-fashioned system of nomination by party conventions, two questions were always asked concerning a candidate: first, did the party want him? and, second, could he be elected? It was not enough for the leaders to know whether the candidate was popular with the majority of their followers. It was an equally important question—in fact, in a great many instances, a much more important question—whether he could attract a sufficient number of votes from the opposite party,

or hold a sufficient number of doubtful votes within his own party, to make his election reasonably certain. They wanted to get the strongest candidate they could; and the strongest candidate was not always the man for whom his party associates were most enthusiastic. He was commonly a man of more moderate views than they. Take a salient instance, which has now become historical. In the Presidential campaign of 1860, if the Republican convention had consulted the wishes of the majority of voters within the party it would have nominated Seward. He had taken strong ground against slavery; and northern Republicans who were excited by the heat of our slavery contest saw in him their natural champion. But sagacious men knew that Seward could not be elected, and convinced the convention of the soundness of that view. It nominated Lincoln—a man who cared less for abstract principles than Seward, and more for Constitutional law; less for the abolition of slavery, and more for the preservation of the Union. The nomination of Lincoln was a distinct disappointment to extremists throughout the North; but it appealed to moderate men in States adjoining the Potomac and the Ohio, whose votes were necessary and sufficient to elect him.

This instance is a typical one. The convention system has been distinctly favorable to the nomination of businesslike candidates for the principal offices—of candidates who were unsatisfactory to some of the extreme elements in their own party and satisfactory to the moderate men in the opposite party. It has tended to give us men who appealed to the country instead of appealing to a group. With the substitution of the direct primary, we are bound to lose something of this advantage. We are almost certain to see a larger number of candidates who represent extreme views on either side. To prevent this danger from becoming fatal the press of the country will have to recognize the responsibility that is placed in its hands by the new conditions, and assume that the position of the editor, no less than that of the government official, is one of public trust.

ARTHUR T. HADLEY.